

I want Gaddafi on trial but I want a free Libya first

Noman Benotman

The Nato intervention in Libya has hit a wall. Despite the continuing bombardment, Colonel Gaddafi refuses to step down, but the anti-Gaddafi rebels can't force him from power themselves.

At the same time, Nato cannot do more to help the rebel forces without exceeding its original UN mandate, risking excessive civilian casualties and losing the support of voters in the UK, France and the US.

There is another challenge for Nato too. In less than a week, the Muslim holy month of Ramadan begins. This will constrain Nato's ability to act, as it will not want to be seen attacking a Muslim country in this holy period. At the same time, Gaddafi clearly plans to use the month to repair damage to his battered institutions and military.

Meanwhile, many rebel leaders, particularly those of a religious inclination, intend to continue and even step up attacks during Ramadan,

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a month that they regard as auspicious.

Nato's priority is to try to negotiate a deal in the week remaining before the start of Ramadan. In particular, it wants a compromise under which Gaddafi is allowed to remain in Libya while taking no part in politics. Crucially, this approach has been backed by key European political leaders. Last week, Alain Juppé, the French Foreign Minister, said that "one of the scenarios effectively envisaged is that [Gaddafi] stays in Libya". William Hague added this week that "what happens to Gaddafi is ultimately a question for the Libyans. It is for the Libyan people to determine their own future."

Although this nuanced approach may seem a retreat from Nato's initial promise to remove Gaddafi swiftly from power, a negotiated end to the fighting makes sense. The rebels are no closer to toppling Gaddafi now than several months ago. And he has entrenched himself not only in the capital, Tripoli, but also in the hearts of many of the tribes in western Libya. Removing him by force would take many months and many lives.

There are important questions now about what form of justice Gaddafi and his associates should face. A warrant for him has been issued for war crimes by the International Criminal Court. As a Libyan, I want to see Gaddafi stand trial for his crimes against my people and to see him held to account.

The priority for now, however, is to end the fighting and start building a free and democratic Libya. Once we have democracy, Libyans would be free to decide Gaddafi's fate themselves.

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